T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 24 February 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair
Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair
Dr Matthew Bach
Ms Melina Bath
Dr Catherine Cumming
Mr Stuart Grimley
Mr Andy Meddick
Mr Cesar Melhem
Dr Samantha Ratnam
Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier
Mr David Davis
Dr Tien Kieu
Mrs Beverley McArthur
Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Ms Jill Pickering, President, and

Ms Ginny Imhoff, Field Officer, Australian Brumby Alliance.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us are gathered on here today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public watching via the live broadcast today.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues participating today and to thank those who have provided their apologies. At this juncture, I will just introduce everybody who is here. My name is Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. To my left is Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair. We have Mrs Bev McArthur down the end of the table there, and just coming into the room is Dr Sam Ratnam; up this end of the table is Mr Andy Meddick, Dr Matthew Bach and Ms Melina Bath; and joining us via live stream is Stuart Grimley.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

With that, I invite you to now make your opening statement. If you could please keep your opening statement to a maximum of 10 minutes, that will allow plenty of time for committee members to ask lots and lots of questions. Thank you very much.

Visual presentation.

Ms PICKERING: Thank you. Okay. Thanks for having me and the Australian Brumby Alliance. Here you have a nice photo of a brumby mob on Bogong High Plains, and as you can see they have trashed the area. Next.

Who are we? We are a collective of lobby groups and mostly rehoming groups, and we have got another one joining us now. We were founded in 2009. These are the five themes: what we do and why we care; brumbies in perspective, with other feral species and animals; alternative paradigms, alternative ways; how we see the best management for brumby populations; and a brief conclusion. Thank you.

What do we do? We promote sustainable—and it is so important you have the word 'sustainable', because it is not as many as want to live there and it is not nothing. We are looking for something in between that is a scientifically sound level. We advocate common groups. We have rehomed nearly 1000 brumbies altogether since 2009. Our goal, just to repeat, is sustainable horse numbers living wild. It is important they live wild, because otherwise they are no longer wild horses. Once they are on private property, they are managed, the vet comes, they are helped and they immediately start to lose the genetic selection that has enabled them to survive in the wild. We want humane, minimally invasive management. We want to work with government, NGOs et cetera, and we are involved in research. Thank you.

We are supported by the Victorian community. There are only two, I think, random surveys that have been done recently. Parks Victoria did one in 2012, and you will see twice as many agreed on average than disagreed that horses are part of the spirit, should be able to roam freely and do have a positive impact. Our survey later on, a couple of years ago, found around 84–85 per cent across supported further research, felt brumbies are

important for our history and supported having—and this is very important—small sustainable numbers where they are not causing too much damage. Next.

Now, we did not get very far after years of negotiation, so the only option left was to go to court—very sadly. That was not just to say, 'Don't kill brumbies'; it was to say, 'Don't totally eradicate an entire population'. Because each population in our view has historic specialities. Anyway, the judge did not agree, but he did—and this is so important—accept that the continuing presence of brumbies in the alps contributes to national heritage values relating to High Country pioneering history. The problem we had was you had to reach the significance bar in order to stop them, and we did not quite reach that. At the bottom left, just to show we are not talking through our hat when we talk about history, there is an identical-looking set of wild horses—well, horses that were bred in the wild—in the Myrtleford saleyards heading to India. You will see in the columns, which are hard to read, that basically Victoria sent twice as many than New South Wales to the wars. Right, next.

For perspective, regarding deer and pigs et cetera, interestingly the Auditor-General in 2016 did a review looking at Ramsar management. In terms of Parks Victoria, who are referred to, because that is who we deal with, it was more to say, 'This is what we suggest doesn't happen and this is what we suggest could perhaps be better'. Anyway, on Parks Victoria, he said Parks Victoria are unable to recognise and act on emerging threats, and we heard that earlier from both speakers. Just below are three examples of stuff in the paper. There is an inability to evaluate to inform and improve further planning. I was getting a strong message with the other two speakers of this issue, so we can identify directly with that. Next.

Now, this is well worth a look. It is very hard to get figures out of Parks Victoria on deer, pigs et cetera, but with Barmah we do have at least a starting point. Barmah is up near Echuca—a national park. Now, we have got three years covered: orange, 2018; green, 2019; brown, 2020. So on the left we have got horses. Because Parks said in 2020 there were 500 in Barmah, which we would dispute but we will take what Parks says for this, if you extrapolate it back, that is 370 in 2018. We are looking at a 16 per cent increase. Horses, as one of the speakers said, increase between 10 and 20 per cent and sometimes a little more, so we have been generous and made it a 16 per cent population increase. So you have 370—the yellow. A year later that is 429, and 500—the brown—in 2020. It is not that large compared to the others.

Deer—there were 1000-plus in Barmah, I was told by Parks Victoria, in 2018. The deer rate of a 55 per cent increase is from the Victorian National Parks Association rate. It is very hard to get a starting point. The general literature says, depending on which type of deer, it can go up to 70 per cent—that is sambar. Now, with that increase rate, by the next year it is 1550 and the following year it is 2400-plus. So it is 2½ times—doubled—what it was in the first year. And if you look at the height of that, what I am trying to show you is the degree of priorities that we feel should be put on the faster increasing species. It is much lower. Then you have got pigs. In 2018 Parks said, 'Yeah, yeah. There's well over 1000'. So we have taken 1000. But at 70 per cent that becomes 1700 and then nearly 3000. So in the space of 2018 to 2020 you can see that although horses can reproduce at 16 per cent, depending on feed, the effort put into managing them is out of proportion, in our view, to the other species. So that is, for us, an important slide. Next, thanks.

All right, now, interestingly I asked: what is horse impact? First of all, a background:

> **Positive** ecological impact is rarely if ever acknowledged—

this is our statement—

> because of the strong belief of Australian environmentalists; that since horses are introduced—

and you heard it, heavy, hard hooves—they can only cause damage.

So they do not talk about more butterflies, less skinks. They just say that because there is a hoof print, that is damage, because it is from a horse. So okay, let us compare that to human amenities. So you have got a footpath—on the left is the horse picture, near Kosciuszko, from national parks. The next one is just googled—a walking track in a similar area—and then bicycle and motor amenities. Now, you can look at the proportion of change to the land that they are going on, but that is not focused on; what is focused on is a few horses on the left that, if managed properly, would just keep to that. Next, thank you.

Okay, now we look at a very interesting comparison of non-native species. On the one extreme you have got horses, which Parks Victoria and the government are totally dedicated to eradicating. They will not perhaps quite do it in the eastern alps, but they will get them so low that they will not be genetically viable. Then you have got pigs. They are just ongoing, keeping down as much as possible. Then you have got deer; as we heard,

they are protected in sustainable populations—not altogether, but they are not trying to get rid of them all and they are rapidly spreading. And this is the one I love: fish, trout—they actively breed them and then repopulate the rivers in the parks so that the angling fraternity can enjoy their fishing. So to us it is like there is a persecution of the horses, and the big fault horses have is they are visible, easy to see; they do not run away. Deer and pigs are nocturnal, and fish are down below the water surface. We have got to look beyond what just seems the obvious issue, in our view. Next, thanks.

We need, as I think an earlier speaker said, objective, robust studies that see exactly what is going on, not what they think is going on. Now, we have been somewhat saddened to see really serious flaws in horse environmental studies. I cannot generalise across all the other species, but when it comes to horses, this strong desire that horses are no good seems to pervade the whole issue. So one of the complaints is they compact soil. That goes back to Dyring in 1990. In fact Dyring only was talking about the footpaths that the horses walk along, she was not talking about the whole area that the footpaths were in. And that area that she measured was not even 1 per cent of the entire area. So since then we hear they are compacting soil, but the original study that identified this showed it was only on the footpaths—the horse paths, whatever—probably other animals used them anyway, and it is minuscule. Casual science. This Bogong High Plains study—there is a reference list at the back to show you all, which I did not quite finish in time to get the copies done, but it is with you, in front of you. This is a scientific study: 18 discrete dung piles counted. No talk about the size of the dung, the area it was counted in, just the fact that there were 18 piles. In fact when our scientist tested the area—mind you, of course, you could say it is skewed by being for us—he only found 2 per cent of the area with dung. The rest was, again, clear. Next, thank you.

Cut and paste—this worries us too. The second draft—they did three drafts—said, 'Oh, the damage is going to go on and on and on because dung takes five years to decompose'. Now, I checked the reference; that was entirely talking about cows, and cow dung is very different to horse dung. Horse dung in fact will decompose in only about a year and a quarter, and there are two studies we can quote for that.

Jumping to conclusions: this embodies what we feel is just a focus on, 'Get rid of the horses, find the evidence'. So here you have this study person that sees 11 horses and two foals, yet the vegetation—this is on Bogong High Plains—condition has measurably declined in many sites. Now, this is where there is an ongoing deer problem. At the very time the study was done 100 deer-plus were shot. But the study person does not think, 'Oh, I wonder if it could be deer or pigs or something', no. All that damage, and because there is a hoof print or dung near the damage and they cannot see anything else obvious, it has to be from the horse. Next, thanks.

Falsely accusing: now, we have always suspected that so many of the photos even now that are shown on the pictures, and this is obviously from our perspective, are in fact damage from deer—you know, steeply cut sides, very low wallows. Horses would get cast in a wallow that low. And in court under cross-examination this researcher had to admit that several sites, about four or so, were labelled 'horse-only damage', but in fact when they went back to their original notes, their original notes said 'deer only'. So deer-only damage on a site study for Parks Victoria, who should know the difference—they simply changed the information. Now, I am sure it was not intentional. It was this mantra of, 'Well, horses cause damage, so that can't be right; this is what the answer must be'.

The CHAIR: Ms Pickering, I will just remind you that we will need to have time for questions of you—

Ms PICKERING: Oh, sorry.

The CHAIR: so I am just watching the time. Sorry.

Ms PICKERING: Next. This is a lovely picture; this is in the eastern alps, not from the study—if a scientist came along later and the horse had pooed or left a hoof print, the horse would have been blamed. Next, thank you. How many minutes have I got?

The CHAIR: Well, it was meant to be 10 minutes, so you are quite well over time now, but anyway.

Ms PICKERING: Positive impact—we have talked about that. Now, on Cowombat, after the fires, yes, they went in and they did a lot of aerial shooting, and the reason for deciding to now shoot horses was—this picture is evidence. Now, you cannot see it easily, but there are five horses on there. They said, 'Those horses are eating the grass that the native species should be eating', and they were most likely killed. Now, we say grazing had kept that area free and provided a refuge.

Now, the solution. We are near the end. What we see as the long-term vision for horses is, and this is taken from the deer wording: no longer significantly impacting on priority environment and Aboriginal cultural heritage values, ongoing management through partnership—and we would add brumby heritage research. The funding for the deer was $1 million, nearly $2 million. We see management and the way of dealing with the problem without losing our heritage as starting off with a proper, robust study that looks at the positives and negatives, not just negatives, and looks at social behaviours, genetics and grazing patterns. We would manage the populations, and we are preferred to do the fertility control by implementing fertility control. Passive trapping can continue, but hopefully it becomes the secondary management. Fertility control—once the numbers are identified and managed there need only be a little trapping to deal with any excess each year. We need to formalise rehoming and keep a genetic safety net so we do not lose an entire population.

Next, the final slide I think. So that is what we can do to help, in our view, slow the decline: proper studies, proper density levels properly managed, promoting the positives, minimising the negatives and, particularly, we keep asking to be involved. We want to be part of this solution, but so far we have got no yeses. There is a solution that will both enable and help native species if all the science is right and the management is kept up. We are happy to help with that to ensure future generations experience wild horse heritage. Thank you. Sorry I went over.

The CHAIR: Did you want to make any comments very quickly?

Ms IMHOFF: No.

The CHAIR: Alright. Dr Ratnam, any questions?

Dr RATNAM: No, I am good if someone else will start.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you so much for coming in today. There does seem a conspiracy against horses in this state within the government departments. Perhaps you can elaborate on the fact of how horses populate, because we do know that in terms of litter sizes goats produce two offspring, foxes six, pigs 10, deer two, and goats would have two litters a year, foxes six, pigs two, deer one. Horses are lucky if they will produce one foal in a year, and hopefully it might survive, but it may not, and their longevity in these very rough and tough conditions is not great, not like it is if we are in a domesticated situation where we have got the vets and the horse feed and the horse rugs and everything else. To allege that horses are somehow growing exponentially but not inform the population exactly how these other species—the deer rut and therefore ringbark trees. The pigs wallow. Horses generally do not like to go puddling around in water at all, so we should dispel that myth.

Why is it, do you think, that we have got government departments especially, and some environmentalists, wanting to perpetrate this myth that horses are the most dangerous vermin that we could have in not the outback but the High Country, particularly when these other species of animals, introduced species—and I have not included dogs and cats—cause no end of trouble, especially to small wildlife. We learned yesterday exactly how many birds a cat kills in a year. Where do you think this sort of view has come from that permeates government departments?

Ms PICKERING: That is an interesting question. I think it started off with grazing in the high country 100 years ago, leading up to the Snowies, and then Alec, an environmentalist, did a lot of studies on basically showing that there was a severely overpopulated number of cattle, which at the time was part of history. They wanted the grazing, but it was too much. The environmentalists pushed hard and they got rid of the cattle, and for good reason because—well, they could have managed smaller numbers—the situation was not tenable. I think this fear of massive hard-hooved animals across the environment puts them—you know, they think, 'Oh, we've wasted all our work'. It is like it is just a shock. On top of that, the horse is highly visible, and because people are so slow to address emerging threats, they have seen the damage for the last certainly 30 years, 20 years. And as you saw from the slide, it is still not really on the radar of a researcher that there are a lot of deer and possibly pigs, because you cannot see them. They are not visible. And they do not go around at night and they do not film at night, but they see the horse. So given the excessive grazing, followed by horses being very visible, I think that is why. In our view, they have lost the plot. They have lost the reality of looking at: 'Well, exactly what is it and are there any positives?'. They just refuse to acknowledge—this is what the scientists say—that there is a positive.

What was the other question? Oh, reproduction. That slide to us was a real eye-opener. Horses will have on average two foals every three years. They usually do not have them every year. That is partly for food supplies and their own health, because it takes a lot. As any mums would know, feeding a baby in the womb is a lot of effort and energy. So they produce two out of three, and as with all those that are produced, there is a death rate—there is a failure rate—so you cannot just increase the population by the birth rate.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Pickering, for your submission, and welcome, Ginny, as well. Thanks for coming in. You mentioned in your presentation about management actions, in particular regulating rehoming. I have a question in relation to Parks Victoria, which have stated that they have directly approached 17 horse and animal welfare groups regarding rehoming of brumbies but have only had three formal expressions of interest, and I would be interested to know of your experience with Parks Victoria and their rehoming program.

Ms PICKERING: We met a couple of years ago with Parks Victoria because the final plan came out, and the draft said there would be a holding point for people to collect brumbies from, like there is a New South Wales at Tumut—a purpose-built area where you can separate herds, keep the stallions separate and then identify what has been collected, load it up and off it goes, next one comes in. Parks have consistently since then said, 'No—no holding point, no transfer point'. So we say, 'Well, what do we do? Have we have got to bump our way all the way up to where the traps are in the middle of the east alps?'. They just could not reply to that. They have done very little to explain how they are going to arrange the transfer, and I think that has been a real dampener on a lot of rehomers, bearing in mind that there are many more coming out of Kosciuszko. So really it has got an easy access, it can be handled all right—let us go there. It is a lot safer. I mean, the risk of injury to horse or human is high in an uncontained environment for transferring.

Mr GRIMLEY: Just with your experience rehoming wild brumbies, how feasible is this as a large-scale operation?

Ms PICKERING: Traditionally our groups have taken about 50, 60, perhaps 70 a year. They cannot take more than that because they are volunteers. They run a volunteer, hands-on program, and they also have to raise the money to pay for the infrastructure and the property. I have lost the plot—what was it?

The CHAIR: The rehoming.

Ms PICKERING: Yes, how feasible. There is a limit to each rehoming group. Now, you could have one huge group but then you would get all the administrative issues, and also smaller groups have less time to travel to the nearest rehoming group. The problem is it is heavy, hard work, and there is a high burnout rate. We have lost as many members as we have gained. There is a turnover of new members. We have got two lots of literature, which I am happy to send in if it helps, on how to start up a rehoming group and, if you are a professional horse handler for domestic horses, how to adapt that to wild horses.

Now, there is probably a market limit. You cannot flood the market when there are so many other types of horses that can be bought that people like. We would argue that probably 600 a year from either Parks Victoria or New South Wales—or say between them 1000—would amply supply the market. That is why we push for fertility control: because once you have brought them down to a level that is manageable—this is our view—then fertility control will easily, as has happened in America for four years now, dart delivered, maintain that population. Or maybe there is flexibility for 100 brumbies to be rehomed in Victoria, then two or possibly three rehoming groups that know what they are doing, which is what we mean by better regulation, and have government support for at least infrastructure—it has got to be a partnership, a two-way thing. That is the ideal, because then you are not killing animals just for the sake of it—a brumby not born does not have to be shot—and the rehoming is balanced if it is settled.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

Ms IMHOFF: Might I add to that? In Victoria currently it is very different to the situation in New South Wales. When the New South Wales management program kicked in again and they started removing, trapping, a lot of brumbies up there, because the process is a lot easier for rehomers, they have had many, many people step up and start new sanctuaries. They have had a lot more success with rehomers because they have a facility where people can pick them up safely. In Victoria, if you are familiar with the alps and where the trapping sites are, the Cobberas are very rough. It is the roughest part of the alps. These trap sites—I have been to them—are

often on barely accessible rough tracks right in off the main access points. For someone who is not familiar with that country, to go up and pick trapped brumbies up from a remote, rough location with a float or a stock crate—that is a big ask. It is very off-putting, and I think that is certainly why people have looked to New South Wales and the Kosciusko brumbies. Parks Victoria also put a limit on the distance the horses could travel after that. Now, from Kosciuszko they are going to a fabulous sanctuary in South Australia, at Gawler—you know, probably 1000 kilometres. I think Parks—Jill, you will correct me—put 500.

Ms PICKERING: I am not actually sure.

Ms IMHOFF: It was a much shorter distance so—

Mrs McARTHUR: For what reason would they put a limit on how far?

Ms IMHOFF: I have no idea, but it essentially ruled out our major rehomer, Colleen O'Brien at the VBA. She lives in Glenlogie in western Victoria. She has been for 12, 13 years bringing horses down from Kosciuszko. She goes up and down, picks them up from a safe facility, loads them up, drives down the highway, you know, 1000 or so k's. She knows how to travel the horses; they arrive in a good state and there are no problems with safe transport.

The CHAIR: Sorry, if I could just interrupt, we have only got literally 10 minutes left for your presentation. I know a number of other people will have questions. But what we might do is, if we do run out of time, then people can submit their questions in writing to you and then you can respond on notice.

Ms IMHOFF: Okay.

Ms PICKERING: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Chair, could they be invited back?

The CHAIR: Yes, possibly, but it depends.

Ms PICKERING: You are time pressed.

The CHAIR: Yes, we are, because there is only 45 minutes per witness.

Ms PICKERING: Yes, sorry.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, both, for your very substantive submission and your presentation today. I will straight up say that there are two questions I would like to submit as on notice, and you can reply to those, and I will list them now: the cost of a holding point, work to construct and to maintain; and if you have any concerns about any horses being taken to slaughter as a result in any of the settings.

There is a lot of dispute, a lot of conjecture around brumbies and their environmental impacts and all sorts of things, but a lot of that centres as well around the disputed numbers. There are lots of figures floating around about how many there actually are. In your opinion is a new count needed and, if it is, who should conduct that? Should it be a combination of government departments and people on the ground so that there is complete transparency, or should it be conducted by just Parks or by yourselves? That is the key thing here for me: the numbers directly talk to the impacts in the environment, as we are being told by the Invasive Species Council and others. So who should do that?

Ms PICKERING: Now, we have to stop this 'Parks or brumby supporters' doing things. We have to do it together. We are just continually arguing with each other, which is such a waste of effort and time. We have asked Parks to be directly involved in the counts and the brumby issue—they are obviously in control, but we need to be part of that, exactly—and research. We asked two years ago—and this goes for counts—if you want to get consensus on the number, which is essential to move forward and deal sensibly with it all, then you do it together. You know, you both draw up the prescriptions of what is going to be tested, you both look at the results together and you both decide, based on your criteria, the way we will go, end of story. That is what would be wonderful, if we could get it. And yes, we need another count, because the last count in most people's view is way over the top—of 5000 from 2350—but irrespective of that, major fires have gone through the

whole area, and that is capable of major disruption to numbers. So yes, we need a new count, and yes, it is essential it is done together.

Mr MEDDICK: The reason I ask that question is for me every single thing that happens surrounding this particular subject stems from that single point onwards, whether you are a person who wants to initiate fertility control or not, because there is conjecture around that as well, and whether you take all the population and rehome them elsewhere or whether they stay in the park to a certain degree or not. None of these questions can be solved or answered in any way unless we actually know how many are there. Is that a correct starting point, at least, for this?

Ms PICKERING: It is a good starting point provided both sides commit to: 'That's the number'. As soon as you get 'Oh, no, it's less than that', 'No, it's more than that', you spend countless hours arguing and not doing anything. We want to get to the doing; we want to be part of supporting a workable solution, which based on robust studies needs to show what is the positive, what is the negative, at what density level—and this is what the researchers are working on at the moment—and how to identify a sustainable level for both the horses and the environment. Obviously our environment is top priority, and we are environmentalists, but we see an environment where some horses will in fact help. I do not think we got the slide, unless I missed it—one of the slides had a picture of a skink towards the end.

Mr MEDDICK: It is in here.

Ms PICKERING: Yes, I must have—because this is an example. It has not been proved; we have not done sufficient studies to know what figures are going to have changed the skink numbers there, but there is definitely a sense that there are more skinks by dung—because of the insects, no doubt—and frogspawn actually using these pugging positions that environmentalists say are terrible and damage the land. They are using it to get protection for their frogspawn, and that is what the white blobs are.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Imhoff and Ms Pickering. Your passion for your animals, or nature's animals, is astounding—and your commitment to them—so I just would like to thank you for your ongoing work and dedication. I guess my question has somewhat been answered, but I just want to reflect on the need for Parks to work with you. I note that there was a feral horse strategic plan that was destined from 2018 to 2021. The plan talked about potential rehoming, capture and control, and culling was a last resort, whereas we saw that the actual eventuality of culling was brought forward. I note that many people wrote to me and, I am sure, many of us here—

Ms PICKERING: Because of the five horses in the middle of Cowombat Flat.

Ms BATH: And so I guess we are making recommendations to government about the support for improvement to ecosystems, the survival of ecosystems.

Ms PICKERING: Absolutely.

Ms BATH: This is not a Dorothy Dixer—we have not spoken before—but what do you want us to hear for those sorts of recommendations?

Ms PICKERING: Well, pretty much the second-last slide. First of all, get rid of the strong bias—'horses are bad'. Look at it in perspective. Identify horse numbers that can be mostly positive and very little negative for a species in an area—and the research we are doing will provide a formula for that, if the horses stay there long enough for it to be done—then manage that number. And we are not looking at millions. In Victoria, say, for Barmah National Park, where there might be 300—Parks thinks 500—we would suggest 150. Then Bogong High Plains needs to be 150 to retain genetic viability. They have only been under 150 for a short while, so at the moment you could still bring them back. Currently they are at about 100. And in the eastern alps—1500, because there is a larger area and we need a little bit of a reservoir should the 150 on Bogong get very low. So we need some genetic injection. That is our formula. Without having done the research—not based on anything—that is what we feel we would be interested in talking about. So I cannot see 1500 brumbies in the eastern alps causing such damage, but only proper research will show it.

Mrs McARTHUR: Humans will probably cause more damage than that.

Ms PICKERING: Well, we saw all that, but you know—

Ms BATH: Just one, really quickly—and thank you. My other question to rehoming and enabling brumbies to live in a farming situation or with families or the like. Do they rehome well?

Ms PICKERING: Yes, excellently, and I have brought a calendar. I did not have enough, so this can go around to you and end up with the one who does the best work for us! They transform amazingly. The main thing is first impressions. If you are a stranger in another country and someone comes up to you and tries to shoot you or tie you up and keep you restrained, you are not going to think very kindly of them. And that is what we have to do with the brumbies. They have lived independently. They have not had to answer to anyone apart from their herd, so you have got to persuade them that you are someone who is not going to hurt them, you can work with them and they can have a great life—not as good perhaps in the terms of wild but a very different life that can be very productive. And if you go to the website here, you will see examples of the sort of—

Ms IMHOFF: I would just like to add that I have six brumbies of my own. I have competed on them for years. They have been show horses, trail riding horses—

Ms PICKERING: Yes, they can do anything. They jumped over branches.

Ms IMHOFF: They can do anything, and they will come to me wild. It is a very short process to get their trust if you do it properly. They are not unlike any other wild animal. I am looking after a wild mob at the moment for the sanctuary, so I have got seven mares and a former stallion in my paddock. They were wild when they got off the truck and shot down the other end, but now they come up every night and want to be fed and hang around. So yes, they are incredibly easy and very rewarding.

The CHAIR: Well, we have run out of time, so I want to thank you—

Mr HAYES: Can I submit a question on notice then, please?

The CHAIR: Yes. I was going to say if you want to submit it in writing.

Mr HAYES: I just wonder if you could—

The CHAIR: Cliff, it might be better to do that in writing.

Mr HAYES: I will just ask it, if I may, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes, very quickly.

Mr HAYES: You point to systemic issues in Parks Victoria which you say contribute to ecosystem decline, and we have heard this before, but I would be very interested in just getting your point of view on what you think the problems with Parks Victoria are in a systemic sort of way. Not now.

Ms PICKERING: No.

Mr HAYES: If you could give us that in writing.

The CHAIR: And there maybe more questions coming to you, which we will supply in writing.

Ms PICKERING: We would welcome them.

The CHAIR: Then you can respond. We have only got 45 minutes today.

Ms PICKERING: I know.

The CHAIR: It is a very short window.

Ms PICKERING: It must be a nightmare.

The CHAIR: It is very difficult to manage indeed. Thank you very much for coming.

Witnesses withdrew.